

Vernon (Gibbs-Gardner-Bowler) House
46 Clarke Street at northeast corner
of Clarke and Mary Streets
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-34

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
1

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-34

VERNON (CIBBS-CARDNER-BOWLER) HOUSE

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
1-

Location: 46 Clarke Street, northeast corner of Clarke and Mary Streets, Newport, Newport County, Rhode Island

Present Owner: Margaretta Kingsbury Maganini (Mrs. Quinto Maganini)

Present Occupants: Mr. and Mrs. Quinto Maganini

Present Use: Dwelling and historic house museum

Statement of Significance: The Vernon House has been designated a Registered National Historic Landmark based upon its significance as an outstanding example of 18th-century architecture. The house in its present form, as enlarged about 1760, has been attributed to Peter Harrison. In its north-west parlor it preserves a unique example of early 18th-century mural decoration.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: c. 1703-1708
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The building is located in Plat 24, Lot 93. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to page and volume of the Land Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--). Other references are to manuscripts which may be found in the Newport Historical Society.

1708 Deed of November 10, 1708, recorded in Turner Manuscript of Colonial Records, Section II, p. 3.

1708 Will of Mary Stanton recorded in Town Council Book 2, p. 185.

Both these documents involve adjoining properties to the Clarke Street and Mary Street corner lot. William Cibbs is listed as the owner of this property. Presumably the original portions of the house were on this property. Stylistically this portion is of an early date.

1713 Deed of October 18, 1713, recorded in Turner Manuscript of Colonial Records, Section II, p. 51.

VERNON (GIBBS-GARDNER-BOWLER) HOUSE
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From: Nicholas Easton, Yeoman
To: William Gibbs, Painter

This deed describes the acquisition of an adjoining lot, 60 feet by 50 feet, which was bordered by Spring Street on the east, Mary Lane on the south, and the property of said William Gibbs on the west.

- 1729 Inventory of the Estate of William Gibbs, recorded April 7, 1729, recorded in Town Council Book 6, p. 163.

William Gibbs died intestate January 12, 1728/29.

- 1731 Inventory of the Estate of William Gardner, son-in-law of William Gibbs, recorded in Town Council Book 7, pp. 89-92.

William Gardner was lost at sea in 1728/29. Elizabeth Gibbs Gardner continued to live in the house after the deaths of her father and husband. She remained in the house after her marriage to James Martin on April 9, 1732.

- 1736 Settlement of the Estate of Elizabeth Gibbs Gardner Martin.

A three-year period of litigation followed between James Martin and Mrs. Abigail Gardner, acting for some of her grandchildren.

- 1739 The house was awarded to the Gardner heirs.

Between 1739 and 1747, William Gardner, Jr., bought his sister's share.

- 1747 Deed of April 27, 1747, recorded in LEB. 17, p. 208.

From: William Gardner
To: Patrick Grant

No boundaries are listed in this deed.

- 1748 Deed of July, 1748, recorded in LEB. 17, p. 190.

From: Patrick Grant
To: Charles Bowler

- 1760 Deed of January 2, 1760, recorded in LEB. 14, pp. 309-310.

From: Charles Bowler
To: Metcalf Bowler, his son

The property is described as, "measuring in length from East to West 120 feet and width from North to South 50 feet. N'ly William Paul, E'ly, S'ly, and W'ly upon the streets..."

- 1772 William Vernon leased the house as early as 1772. He also had a mortgage on the property.
- 1774 Deed of May 6, 1774. The original deed is in the Vernon Papers, Newport Historical Society.

From: Metcalf Bowler
To: William Vernon
For: 750 pounds

"... A lot of Land... East to West 120 feet, North to South 48 feet, N'ly on William Vernon's land, E'ly on Spring Street, S'ly on Mary Lane, W'ly on Clarke Street." Vernon had already purchased the adjoining lot to the north, June 5, 1767. (See LEB. 16, pp. 274-75.)

- 1782 Deed of January 14, 1782, recorded in LEB. 4, p. 243.

From: Miers Fisher, Philadelphia Gentleman and Sarah Redwood, his wife
To: Samuel Vernon, Jr.
For: 280 Spanish milled dollars

"... a lot of land at the intersection of two streets, one of them called Clarke and the other of them known by the name of the New Lane /Mary Lane or Street/..."

"... Samuel Vernon conceived the idea of buying the lot opposite the house for a garden. There was an old house on it, which had been damaged by fire, and was uninhabitable. If this were removed there would be a clear view to the water. The old house was removed, and a flower garden laid out here, whose long straight path, with box edgings and flower beds on either side is still recalled..." Excerpt from Maude Lyman Stevens, p. 46. This lot was sold August 1, 1871, by Sophia Vernon to Archie Pell. (See LEB. 42, p. 293.)

- 1806 Sons of William Vernon, Samuel and William H. Vernon, inherited the house.

- 1836 Deed of May 21, 1836, recorded in LEB. 21, p. 150.

From: Heirs of Samuel Vernon
To: Elizabeth A. Vernon

- 1871 Deed of June, 1871, recorded in LEB. 42, p. 35.

From: Elizabeth A. Vernon
To: Sophia Vernon

1872 Deed of April 11, 1872, recorded in LEB. 42, p. 511.

From: Sophia Vernon
To: Harwood E. Read

1913 Deed of March 29, 1913, recorded in LEB. 98, p. 124.

From: Sarah W. Read et al., heirs of Harwood E. Read
To: Charity Organization Society (later called Family Service Society)

1964 Deed of December 15, 1964, recorded in LEB. 212, pp. 577-83.

From: Family Service Society
To: Margaretta Kingsbury Maganini
For: \$40,000

Restrictions and covenants were made part of this deed to preserve the historical and architectural value for the benefit of the Family Service Society and the Preservation Society of Newport County.

1. One single-family dwelling is the only allowed use of the house and property.
 2. Architectural plans and specifications for any exterior or interior work to be done on the house must be submitted in advance to the Preservation Society.
 3. The first and second floors are to be open to the public six days each year, to be arranged by the Preservation Society.
 4. The northwest room on the first floor containing the murals is to be open for private inspection at least once a week by appointment through the Preservation Society.
 5. The murals in that room are to be restored and preserved.
 6. The Preservation Society has first refusal of any future sale of the house.
4. Builder or contractor: Unknown. It is possible that the first owner, William Gibbs, did the wall paintings, c. 1720-1725. He painted the King's Arms for the Colony House (RI-33).
5. Original plans: None known. As far as can be determined, the original plan consisted of two rooms and a center hall facing Clarke Street, with an ell at the rear, a garret, and a cellar. The inventory of the estate of William Gibbs taken in 1729, lists, "Great Room, great room clossett, lesser room, bedd room, Great Room upstairs, lesser room upstairs, in ye

clossett, in ye Garrett, in ye Kitchen, in ye stable, in ye cellar..."

6. Alterations and additions: An inventory of the estate of William Gardner taken in 1731, lists a porch chamber in addition to those mentioned above. James Martin, inhabitant of the house from 1732 to 1739, added a bedroom, c. 1732. The exact location of this room is not known. Metcalf Bowler enlarged the house, probably when he acquired it in 1760. The southeast section along Mary Street was added to make a square, formal, two-story, hipped-roof house with a one-story ell. All the exterior was finished with rusticated siding. Because of the sophisticated handling of the exterior detailing and the use of rusticated blocks, as at Redwood Library, 1784 (RI-100), Peter Harrison's name has been associated with this work. However, no documentation for this attribution has been found. After the house was occupied by General Rochambeau from 1780 to 1782, the Vernons made repairs to the house--including exterior painting with sanded finish, repairs to floors, wainscot, hangings, windows, walls, and marble hearths. It is thought that the original twelve-over-twelve sashes may have been replaced with the six-over-six, double-hung windows at this period of repair, 1782-83. Maude Lyman Stevens reported in The Vernon House, Newport, Rhode Island 1758-1915, that the southeast room on the first floor was altered, perhaps by Vernon after the Revolution. The character of the detail is somewhat different from that in the rest of the house. It may also date from 1806, when Samuel Vernon inherited the house. It could also be a good restoration of an even later date. Harwood Read made repairs in 1879. (New sills were installed on the Mary Street side. The house was raised about four inches. Interior changes were also made, but are not clearly documented.) Upon the purchase in 1913 by the Gharity Organization Society, the house was again renovated. The original front door, the old knocker, the lantern above the door, and the sash for the landing window were replaced. The front door lock came from the Bull-Mawdsley House (RI-35), now the property of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Since their purchase of the Vernon House in 1964, the Maganinis have completed some interior alterations. A partition was erected in the old kitchen to accommodate a bathroom. A shower was installed in a closet between the southwest and northwest second-floor rooms. The painted, two-paneled door found in the attic has been moved from the north wall of the southwest attic room to a doorway at the rear of the hall leading to a new bathroom. In the northwest parlor, some of the later 18th-century over-paneling has been removed to better display the restored wall paintings.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Vernon House stands on land originally owned by Jeremy Clarke, one of the early settlers of Newport. Charles Bowler, who acquired the house in 1748, was a wealthy merchant who had arrived in Boston in 1740. He became Collector of Revenues in Newport in 1753. His son Metcalf, who bought the house in 1759, was also wealthy and influential. He was a church warden of Trinity Church. John Singleton Copley painted portraits of him and his wife. Bowler was also active in Colonial affairs. He was appointed Justice of the Supreme Court in 1776. However, it has been discovered through research that Metcalf Bowler never severed his British connections. He served as a British spy throughout the Revolutionary War.

William Vernon was a merchant and shipowner. The Vernons were old settlers in Newport. Daniel Vernon arrived in Newport in 1666. When the French came to Newport in 1780, William Vernon allowed his house to be used to quarter members of the French army. The Commander-in-Chief, His Excellency Monsieur le Comte de Rochambeau (Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur) lived in the house. He used the northwest parlor for his office. Here General George Washington conferred with Rochambeau when he came to Newport in 1781. An illumination and ball were given in Washington's honor in the French Hall. Rochambeau entertained the General at supper. Washington is said to have slept in the northwest chamber. The Marquis de Lafayette met with Rochambeau in the house in 1780. The French Minister Plenipotentiary, Le Chevalier de la Luzerne also made a visit. Iroquois Indian chiefs from Canada and New York came to Newport to see Rochambeau, a visit which lasted four days.

William Vernon's two sons, Samuel and William, inherited the house after their father's death in 1806. Samuel remained in Newport, continuing his father's business. William who graduated from Princeton in 1776, went to France with John Adams, then Commissioner of France, as a companion for John Quincy Adams, then eleven years old. William Vernon became a prominent figure in the Court of Louis XVI and a favorite of Marie Antoinette. He returned to Newport in 1796, having acquired a remarkable collection of paintings. One painting was possibly one of the three versions Leonardo da Vinci is supposed to have painted of the "Mona Lisa." The collection--part of which was exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum in 1830--was sold in 1835, after Vernon's death in 1833.

During the ownership of Harwood E. Read, the Vernon House was used as office space. Between late 1879 and 1881, the United States Geological Bureau under the direction of Raphael Pumpelly had offices on the first floor. Pumpelly continued to have his office in the house until 1883. However, during these years, he is listed as being the director of the Northern Trans-continental

Survey. In 1882-1883, Clarence S. Luce, architect of houses in Boston, Newport, and New York, rented office space and chambers.

A bronze marker designating the house as Rochambeau's Headquarters was placed on the house in 1908. The Vernon House was made a National Historic Landmark in 1969.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A rendering of the west facade appears in Samuel Adams Drake, Nooks and Corners of the New England Coast. An exterior view from the west appears in Charles F. McKim, Old Newport Houses, 1875. A photograph, c. 1880, of the interior central hall shows the office space of Raphael Pumpelly, Newport Historical Society. The Newport Historical Society also has a collection of photographs showing the wall paintings before restoration in 1936, and other undated interior and exterior views. The Preservation Society of Newport County has photographs of the wall paintings during restoration by Quinto Maganini, 1967-68.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

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Prepared by Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman
Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission
August, 1969

Susan R. Slade
Architectural Historian
July, 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: As it stands today--double its original size--the Vernon House is an excellent example of the fully developed Georgian mansion house. The building, with its Chinese frescoes, is a unique document of two important building periods.
2. Condition of fabric: The house is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This two-and-a-half story house is approximately square in plan, and measures 42 feet by 40 feet. It has a five-bay west front and is four bays deep.
2. Foundations: The foundation is of slightly dressed field-stone with quoins at the corners. It is now painted gray.
3. Wall construction: The rusticated, masonry-patterned wooden siding is painted white. Originally the building had a gray, sanded finish.
4. Structural system: The house is framed in heavy timbers.
5. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A five-step stoop of brownstone provides access to the center entrance on the west facade. The top step is not original. A bottom step appears to have been covered by a grade change in the Clarke Street sidewalk. Two contemporary wrought-iron railings have been installed on this stoop.
6. Chimneys: The two inside red brick chimneys have stone foundations. The north chimney has been rebuilt above the roof line and has a vaulted stone foundation. The south chimney has a solid stone foundation.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The large, ten-paneled west door is framed by a pilastered Doric doorway. The east or rear door has six panels and is set in a simpler Doric pilastered doorway.
 - b. Windows and shutters: All windows are double hung with six-light sashes. All windows have green louvered shutters. There is a large, round-headed Palladian window centered on the east wall which lights the large stair landing.

8. Roof: The asphalt-shingled, hipped roof has a balustraded flat deck at the top. From marks on the chimney and balustrade, it appears that the original roof had a gable-on-hip configuration. The roof line is finished with a modillion cornice with denticulated bed mold. The three gabled dormers on the west facade are finished with segmental pediments. There are two gabled dormers with triangular pediments on both the north and south sides. Three triangular pedimented, gabled dormers pierce the roof on the east.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The west entrance provides access to a large, formal central hall into which all major rooms open. This east-west hall terminates at the stairway on the east. A short door opening to the rear garden is located under the landing. The four-room plan with center hall is repeated on the second and third floors. The two interior chimneys are placed on a north-south axis, centered in the common walls of the four corner rooms.
2. Stairways: The main stairway in the central hall extends from the first to the second floor. The U-shaped, open-well stairway has an open string with scrolled ornaments on the step ends. There are three turned and carved, spiral balusters per step. The heavy, molded, scrolled, and ramped handrail is balanced by the shadow wainscoting. The landing composition is finished by the Palladian window, which is flanked by solid panels. The narrow, winding service stairway, running from the basement to the attic, is placed against the south side of the north chimney. An additional stairway, extending from the second floor to the attic, winds against the north side of the south chimney.
3. Flooring: All floors are wooden, random planked with widths varying from 5- $\frac{1}{2}$ inches to nine inches. There is a modern concrete basement floor.
4. Wall and ceiling finish:
 - a. First floor: Central hall: The hall is divided front and rear by a broad elliptical arch supported on carved scrolls. The arch has a paneled soffit, and carved floral motifs on the keystone and in the spandrels. The wainscoting with beveled paneling is topped by plaster walls. The plaster ceiling is finished with a large cornice composed of a denticulated bed mold. The hall widens east of the arch to accommodate the stairway.

Northwest parlor: The fully paneled walls with bolelection chair rail are topped by a denticulated ceiling cornice. The fireplace composition centered in the east wall has a projecting chimney breast, an overmantel with a crossetted panel, and a broken-scroll pediment. The brick fireplace opening, 41- $\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide by 33 inches high by 12- $\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep, has no facing. A marble hearth extends into the room. The overmantel has many fewer layers of paint than the other parts of the woodwork. It is either modern or restored. Beneath the beveled floor-to-ceiling paneling on the north and west walls are located wall paintings on the original coved plaster walls. The Chinese scenes are arranged in panels framed in simulated bolelection moldings which are painted in shades of brown. The space between the panels is marbelized in shades of ochre and brown. The lacquered black background, painted over a red undercoat, has green, umber, and red birds, figures, monsters, and scenery done in a japanning technique. Mr. Maganini, under the direction of Morton Bradley, has been restoring the paintings. Some of the later paneling has been removed; other sections have been hinged, so as to expose the paintings for viewing. An 18th-century gray marble mantel, discovered in the house, has not been installed in this room because there is some doubt as to when it was used.

Southwest parlor: The paneled wainscoting is topped with plaster walls. The plaster ceiling is finished by a large, molded cornice. The boxed corner posts have molded edges. The east or fireplace wall has beveled, symmetrically arranged paneling, and a bolelection chair rail. A mantel shelf, probably later in date, tops a brick fireplace, 36 inches wide by 29 inches high by 15 inches deep. There is a stone hearth.

Southeast room: The dining room has paneled wainscoting topped with plaster walls. The plaster ceiling has a molded cornice. A crossetted overmantel panel tops a brick fireplace which is 32 inches wide by 31 inches high by 11 inches deep. There is a stone hearth. An arch-topped corner cupboard with a shaped keystone has a shell hood and three curved shelves behind glazed doors. There is a four paneled door, whose height is the same as that of the wainscoting.

Northeast room: The kitchen has a simple, horizontal board wainscoting, plaster walls and ceiling with a molded cornice. The exposed framing members have molded edges. A cooking fireplace, 51 inches wide by 41 inches high by 17 inches deep, is located in the west wall.

The room has been partitioned to form a vestibule off the central hall and a bathroom off the vestibule. Access to the rear stairs is gained through the vestibule.

- b. Second floor: Central hall: The plaster walls and ceiling have a paneled wainscoting and a modillion ceiling cornice. Paneled pilasters separate the front and rear portions.

Northwest chamber: The plaster walls have exposed framing members with molded edges. The plaster ceiling has a summer beam, now paneled, which runs east-west and is supported by the chimney. The symmetrically paneled fireplace wall has bolection paneling and a brick fireplace, 35 inches wide by 27 inches high by 15 inches deep. When this room was fitted as a laboratory for Pumpelly in 1879, a large overmantel panel was removed. Beneath was discovered a lacquered or japanned wall painting on plaster. (See Newport Mercury, October 18, 1879, for a complete description.) The opening has a plastered face and a stone hearth.

Southwest chamber: This room is similar to the northwest chamber, with plaster walls and ceiling, exposed framing with molded edges, a paneled summer beam, and a beveled, paneled fireplace wall. The brick fireplace, 36 inches wide by 30 inches high by 15 inches deep, has blue and white, 5-1/8-inch-square tiles with Biblical illustrations, and a tiled hearth. The fireplace is enframed by a bolection molding. There is no mantel shelf.

Southeast chamber: The plaster walls with exposed corner framing are topped by a molded cornice. The plaster ceiling contains no summer beam. The brick fireplace, 33 inches wide by 28 inches high by 11 inches deep, has a blue and white tile facing composed of 5-1/8-inch-square tiles with Biblical illustrations. The fireplace is enframed by a double architrave molding similar to the doorways, a simple overmantel and a marble hearth.

Northeast chamber: The plaster walls and ceiling have exposed timber framing and a molded ceiling cornice. The brick fireplace, 36-1/2 inches wide by 29 inches high by 14-1/2 inches deep, may have been about eight inches taller. The opening has a plastered facing and a tiled hearth. The fireplace is enframed by a bolection molding. The overmantel is composed of bolection paneling. The paneling and moldings are more robust than those in the northwest chamber. The room is partitioned like the kitchen below.

- c. Third floor: There are four chambers around the central hall. The northwest chamber is unfinished. The other rooms have low, sloping plaster ceilings, plaster walls, and deep-set dormer windows. The single fireplace, in the southeast chamber, is 30- $\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide by 26 inches high by 13 inches deep. It has a plaster facing and brick hearth. A modern bathroom has been added at the east end of the hall. Two painted, japanned panels from the two-paneled door leading into the southwest room have been installed on the bathroom door. A steep, open stairway in the central hall leads to a modern skylight hatch located on the flat, balustraded roof.
5. Doorways and doors: Most doors have eight panels. The doorways have double molded architraves.
6. Special decorative features: William Vernon returned to the house in 1796, after an extensive visit to France during the French Revolution. While there, he collected many paintings, including works by Rosa, Veronesi, Van Dyke, Lorraine, Notti, Mignard, and Vernet. A selection from this collection of fifty-six paintings was exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum in 1830. The present owners have made a collection of paintings either similar in style and subject matter to those owned by Vernon, or by the same artists. Today, two large pastoral paintings by Pannini hang in the entrance hall. Small landscapes, portraits by Lely, and portraits in the style of Van Dyke are on display throughout the house.
7. Hardware: None of note.
8. Lighting: All fixtures are electric.
9. Heating: A modern hot-water furnace with baseboard and convection units has been installed.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces west on a corner lot in the Historic Hill Redevelopment Area, an historic district. The structure is placed to the sidewalk on the west and south. There is a narrow lawn to the north and a brick paved terrace to the east.
2. Historic landscape design: None.
3. Outbuildings: There are no outbuildings on the property today. During the French occupation, 1780-1781, an assembly room known as the French Hall was built to the north of the house. This hall, traditionally square and known to have been 26 feet in one direction, may have been altered into

a stable which later stood on this site. In 1783 and 1784, the French Hall was reported as being used for singing and dancing lessons. A barn, thought to have been the French Hall, was removed from the north side of the house in 1894. (See Newport Observer, March 28, 1894.)

Prepared by Osmund Overby, Supervisor
Newport HABS Project
July, 1969

Susan R. Slade
Architectural Historian
September 12, 1972

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of a project undertaken in Newport in 1969 by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Operation Clapboard, and the Preservation Society of Newport County. The project was under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS. Supervisor of the recording team was Professor Osmund Overby, University of Missouri. The team was composed of student architects Wrenda E. Bush (Auburn University), Jeffrey A. Chmura (University of Notre Dame), Thomas B. Schubert (University of Illinois), and Barbara A. Stokey (Carnegie-Mellon University). Photographs were made by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Additional research and editing was done by Susan R. Slade, Architectural Historian, in September, 1972.